

Path of Miracles Program Note

In the 12th century, it is thought that some 250,000 people undertook pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, or the northwestern region of modern Spain. Given that the estimated population of the world at the time was only about 300 million people, it means that one in every 1200 people *on earth* at the time undertook the pilgrimage. They came from all parts of Europe, and walked some 1000 kilometers (or about 750 miles) across the Pyrenees mountains, through Roncesvalles, over the arid, flat *meseta*, over the mountain pass of *O Cebreiro* into Galicia, and to Santiago itself, where the remains of the Apostle James are said to rest.

Medieval historians estimate that the average person in the middle ages experienced a “*pays de connaissance*” (or “familiar territory,” a locale within which one knew people and was oneself a known person) of approximately 25 square kilometers, or just 15 square miles. Most people, it is thought, lived out their entire lives within this modest amount of the earth, and rarely ventured outside of it. With this framework in mind, a pilgrimage of almost 1000 kilometers (or more) is extraordinary, and a quarter of a million people each year walking what amounts to 30 times their known world is an absolutely *astounding* phenomenon.

Why did they do it? How did they do it? And what did they hope to accomplish in walking to visit the alleged resting place of the mortal remains of the Apostle James? What was such a dangerous, exhilarating, spiritually imbued, physically taxing journey like? *Who would do such a thing?*

These are central questions posed in poetic collage and music by Robert Dickinson and Joby Talbot in “Path of Miracles,” a work that explores in music the physical progress of pilgrims through four major stops along the Camino Frances, or the principal route through Northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela.

Talbot and Dickinson drew on a wealth of source material to create the libretto, from sources as familiar as the book of Acts to those as specialized as the 12th century *Liber Sancti Jacobi* (Book of St. James), or the *Codex Calixtinus*, as it is commonly known. This important source contains not only hymns, prayers, and services for the worship of Saint James, but also a comprehensive anthology of miracles the saint is said to have accomplished as well as a practical guide for pilgrims along the path to his final resting place.

Presumptive pilgrims can read here the principal towns along the route, where to find meat and fish, how to avoid the dangers and perils of the road, and which important relics (the complete or partial remains of saints) could be visited and venerated on the road to Compostela. In its adoption of a wide and varied array of sources, *Path of Miracles* shows the individual and composite nature of the pilgrimage, which always was and still is an international and multicultural phenomenon.



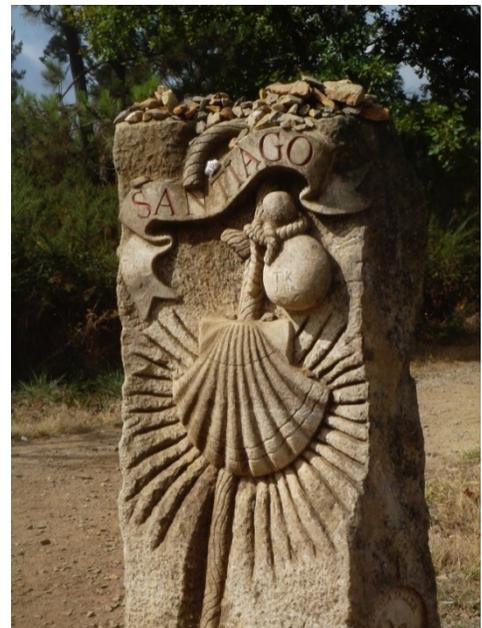
The four movements of Path of Miracles are named after these four cities: Roncesvalles, Burgos, León, and Santiago itself.

I) Roncesvalles, at the foot of the Spanish side of the Pyrenees mountains, was where pilgrims from France and further flung corners of Europe congregated after passing through the mountains, and where many modern pilgrims begin their walks. Talbot's music here draws on an exceptional and striking choral technique inspired by the *Pasibutbut*, a style of singing employed by the Bunun people of Taiwan which is said to imitate the sounds of nature, from the buzzing of bees to the rushing of water and the rustling of leaves in a forest. The movement evokes the beginning of a pilgrimage and tells the story of Saint James's life and martyrdom.

II) Burgos, the great cathedral city of Castille, lay somewhere between a third of the way and halfway along the route. Its gothic cathedral was, for the composer, a site of gloom and gore. This movement was intended, according to Talbot, to evoke the weariness and agony of pilgrims who have been on the road a long time as well as the foreboding of the last judgment depicted on the "Puerta Alta" and the macabre nature of the many saints' relics displayed openly in a chapel there. The music takes on a weary, relentless, and uncomfortable quality as the dangers, sorrows, and physical rigors of the pilgrimage are superimposed on the sufferings of the saints and martyrs of legend.

III) León was seat of the medieval kingdom of León, and it sat at the Western edge of the Meseta, the vast, flat, arid inland plain through which much of the pilgrimage passes. Talbot, upon visiting the cathedral there, was struck by the light streaming through its glass windows. In contrast with the oppressive and relentless music in the previous movement, "León" shimmers with opulent light, hope, and stories of the saints' intercession on behalf of the pilgrims.

IV) Santiago de Compostela was, of course, the terminus of the pilgrimage, and one of the most thrilling moments of *Path of Miracles* is a description of the final few days' journey over the pass of O Cebreiro, into Galicia, and down, eventually, to Santiago. The joyous reappearance at this moment of the long absent name "Santiago" gives the listener an experience analogous to reaching the goal of the pilgrimage after so many steps. Dickinson and Talbot here choose to mark the moment with an ebullient folding together of a song from the *Carmina Burana* celebrating the rebirth of nature and the abundance of music with a text from the *Codex Calixtinus* invoking the protection and aid of St. James.



The final movement also offers some of Dickinson's most striking original poetry, of which this excerpt may be said to sum up the experience both of pilgrimage and musical journey:



*We have walked out of our lives
To come to where the walls of heaven
Are thin as a curtain, transparent as glass.
Where the Apostle spoke the holy words,
Where in death he returned, where God is close,
Where saints and martyrs mark the road.*

- Robert Dickinson

This program note is written by Consiprare baritone, Tim O'Brien. He completed the Camino over ten weeks in 2006, walking roughly 1,000 miles across France and Spain. In Tim's own word, "It's [Path of Miracles] an extraordinary piece of music written about the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela." The photos used in this note are personal photos from his walk on the Camino.

